

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Urban Origins of American Judaism.* By DEBORAH DASH MOORE. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014. Pp. 208. \$32.95.

Trends in the study of history have seen a recent turn toward urban history, both as a feature of particular geographical and ethnic fields, and also as a field of its own. Urban historians pay particular attention to things like the relationship of the built environment to people and the multiple layers of the social construction of space. Urban history has its own historiography and set of canonical theorists, such as Lewis Mumford, Henri Lefebvre, Peter Hall, and Saskia Sassen. *Urban Origins of American Judaism* occasionally flirts with this literature, but it never joins the crowd. Rather, it situates itself much more inside the bounds of the field of American Jewish history than the field of urban history.

Given the book's location in American Jewish history, we might ask, what does it mean to write an urban history in a field that holds a long-standing assumption that its primary location is the city? In one sense, there is nothing new at all about an American Jewish history that takes place in cities. From colonial times to the present, though decreasingly so after the suburbanization of the 1950s and 1960s, large percentages of American Jews have made their homes in cities. Urban commerce allowed many of the economic opportunities Jews sought; the presence of other Jews facilitated religious practice. From the earliest moments in the field, Jewish lives and communities in cities have been the focus of most historical accounts. But in another sense, a new consciousness of this assumption creates the opportunity for new conceptual ways of approaching that history. The move from city life as an assumed focus to city life as an interrogated focus shifts the historical gaze to the material conditions of the city, to space as constructed and contested, to physical movement and overlap, and to the ways the built environment shapes human experience.

One of the strongest contributions of *Urban Origins of American Judaism* is the way it calls attention to the particularities of space in telling its stories. Its three sections—synagogues, streets, and snapshots—each focus on a set of physical objects

that affect how both historians and historical characters imagine city space. The history of Jewish synagogues in colonial America and the United States goes beyond a typical discussion of rabbis, congregational numbers, religious disputes about services or seating, and building negotiations, to consider how the material objects, architecture, and a structure's physical layout shaped people's experiences of and in the space. In 1860, Deborah Moore explains, only six of New York City's twenty-seven congregations had buildings that were built to be synagogues, and these buildings shaped their religious communities and experiences in particular ways (31). When Jewish communities had the chance to build synagogues, they decided what they wanted them to look like architecturally, to feel like as religious participants, and to include as community facilities. When communities sought to appeal to both Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, they sometimes negotiated not only the ritual differences, but also the architectural and spatial differences between the two traditions. Moore tells how the Charleston congregation, for instance, put the *bima*, or reading platform, part-way between the center of the room (Ashkenazi tradition) and the eastern wall (Sephardi tradition). Similar to the attention to urban materiality in the synagogue section, Moore's section on streets includes a captivating discussion of funerals and funeral processions, their spatial practices, and interaction with residents and workers.

The book's origins as a lecture series suggest both its strongest points and the places historians of religion might ask for more. Clearly intended for a general audience, *Urban Origins of American Judaism* is eminently readable, even elegant. It paints vibrant pictures of American Jewish city life. The book tells a familiar story about American Judaism, largely populated by familiar characters, synagogues, organizations, and concepts—Emma Lazarus, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the Lubavitch Rebbe, the Touro synagogue in Rhode Island, Temple Emanu-El in New York, Temple Sinai in Chicago, America as a “free marketplace of religions” (1), the religion clauses of the First Amendment, how Jews and their behaviors “meshed” with “American practices” (2). Though Moore deftly adds women to the mix, in general the book does not seek to overturn or to critique the existing scholarship on American Jewish history.

In fact, the citations of other scholars leave the reader with the impression of a chorus, as if all the voices of American Judaism were in harmony. Moore clearly has an impressive command of the field and brings together studies from the colonial period to the present. This wide-ranging knowledge adds up to a picture of American Judaism that is both diverse and compelling. However, frequently other scholars are quoted merely to provide factual information. To take just one example, Moore writes: “Historian Tobias Brinkman observes ‘The temple was a status symbol of a congregation strongly committed to Chicago. Architect Alfred S. Alschuler designed a large sanctuary with more than two thousand seats.’” (43). Throughout the book's prose, scholars often “observe” or “note,” which suggests a merely observational, rather than analytical role to historical scholarship. Even when a scholar “argues,” the quotation often appears as the last sentence of a paragraph, where the argument is not taken up for further discussion. Though Moore quotes dozens of scholars, she never expresses a disagreement with any of them. In this sense, it intimates an idyllic scholarly story of historians' consensus, but it sells itself short by failing to call attention to its own distinctiveness. It does not stake strong claims about how it might change our view of the field,

or the story of American Jewish history, or other historiographical interventions, such as periodization. Nor does it offer a theoretical path forward for others who might seek to do urban histories of American Judaism.

Although the main attention is to historical places rather than broader theoretical discussions, *Urban Origins of American Judaism* does raise some of these theoretical questions. For example, it offers examples of contested urban space, such as Rabbi Jacob Joseph's 1888 funeral march, which pitted a crowd of largely Jewish immigrant marchers against largely Irish factory workers and policemen. In other instances, more theoretical discussion may have helped resolve—or at least clarify—some of the underlying questions in the text. For example, Moore remarks: "Jews' daily use of the streets transformed some of them into Jewish spaces" (83), and "Judaism required observances that altered urban spaces, with the result that Jews periodically crafted Jewish places out of ordinary commercial, residential, and industrial space" (84). But the contours of the process of Jewish space-making remain opaque. Here it is worth noting that the book curiously omits discussion of the *eruv* and its role in shaping urban space. The creation of an *eruv* is a halakhic practice to transform public space into private space and therefore allow carrying within its bounds on the Sabbath. In this sense, an *eruv* quite literally makes a city into a Jewish place and gives it a Jewish geography. Discussion of the *eruv* (or engagement with Barbara Mann's analysis of the city and the *eruv*)<sup>1</sup> might have allowed greater depth into the questions that haunt the "Streets" chapter in particular, such as what it means for a space to be Jewish, and what the process is by which a place becomes Jewish.

*Urban Origins of American Judaism* thus takes part in a field that has long assumed that the real action is in cities, but has rarely interrogated what that means. Moore's book deftly draws our attention to the built environment, to urban geography, to the density of human interaction, and to the representations of the cityscape. What it sacrifices in theoretical engagement, however, it makes up for in accessibility, narrative elegance, and historical breadth.

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*Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India.*

By LINDA HESS. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xii+447. \$39.95.

With *Bodies of Song*, Linda Hess has written a rich and complex book on the fifteenth-century North Indian poet Kabir, a personage whose onslaught on sectarianism and religious hierarchies and hypocrisy, as prevalent then as now, has fascinated Indian scholars (Purushottam Agrawal, Shukdev Singh, P. N. Tiwari), as well as some of their Western colleagues (Winand Callewaert, David N. Lorenzen, Charlotte Veauville). Foremost among them ranks Linda Hess, whose scholarly work over the last thirty-five years has been focused on Kabir. Among her earlier

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 116–47.